The context of political life in Britain and the United States*

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Political systems are shaped by the societies in which they function. For this reason, it is helpful to know something about the historical, geographical, social and economic settings against which they operate, and to understand something of the values and ideas which have mattered and continue to matter to those who inhabit any individual country.

In this introduction, we examine the background factors that help to shape the way in which political life and processes operate in Britain and America. In particular, we examine similarities and differences in the political culture of the two countries, for some commentators have attempted to identify broadly shared attitudes, belief systems and values that characterise the people of a country. Inevitably, this is to some extent an impressionistic topic and analysts tend to fall back on generalisations about national characteristics.

People's beliefs and values are based on the different experiences to which they are exposed throughout their lives. Growing up in Birmingham (Alabama) is different from growing up in rural Wyoming or New England, just as growing up in Birmingham (West Midlands) is different from growing up in Cornwall or the Lake District. Growing up in Birmingham on either side of the Atlantic is also very different, even if they are both large conurbations with a substantial ethnic mix. These different experiences reflect regional differences and affect what people believe and care about. Further differences derive from such matters as class, ethnicity, gender, language and religion.

The term 'culture' refers to the way of life of a people, the sum of their inherited and cherished ideas, knowledge and values, which together constitute the shared bases of social action. In assessing the attitudes and way of life of a people, it is easy to fall back on generalisations as a shorthand means of describing what they are like. Sometimes, these are related to ideas

* Strictly speaking, Great Britain is comprised of England, Wales and Scotland, and the United Kingdom is made up of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Throughout this book, however, we use 'Britain' and 'United Kingdom' interchangeably. Similarly, US, the USA and America are all used to mean the United States of America.

about national or group character. When in the 1960s the Beach Boys referred to 'California girls', the image they intended to convey was of a sun-tanned, lithe, fun-loving and easy-going category of young women. This is a stereotype, but many members of their audience probably had a clear impression of what such girls were like. However, generalisations such as these have obvious limitations and are insufficient for those who want to analyse the culture of a country. They want a more reliable tool and so turn to survey research. They find out the responses of a selected sample of the population to a series of questions about beliefs and actions, and then assess the overall findings.

Political culture is culture in its political aspect. It emphasises those patterns of thought and behaviour associated with politics in different societies, ones that are widely shared and define the relationship of citizens to their government and to each other in matters affecting politics and public affairs. Citizens of any country or major ethnic or religious community tend to have a common or core political culture, a set of long-term ideas and traditions which are passed on from one generation to the next. The survey work of Almond and Verba[1] led to the publication of *The Civic Culture* in 1963, a landmark study in the field of political culture. Based on lengthy interviews conducted in five countries, the researchers pointed to considerable variations in the political beliefs of the societies they explored.

political culture

The widely held underlying political beliefs and values which most citizens of a country share about the conduct of government, the relationship of citizens to those who rule over them and to one another.

The impressions and survey work of commentators and academics are of interest to those who wish to study politics. They enable us to make comparisons about the approaches which characterise the inhabitants of other democracies. For instance, the French are more willing to resort to social upheaval and 'man the barricades' when conflict between groups arises. In contrast, the British are more willing to compromise, having a long tradition of progress by evolution rather than revolution. Such conclusions can be helpful, but they have their limitations. Their findings about a particular country cannot be regarded as applicable for all people and for all time.

Research inevitably focuses on what the majority of the people appear to think and feel. However, some of the surveys carried out since the 1960s have pointed to the differences in the political beliefs of individuals within the same society. They have also shown that political culture is not an unchanging landscape, a fixed background against which the political process operates. Attitudes can evolve and change over time, for there are in society often a number of forces at work that serve to modify popular attitudes, among them migration and the emergence in a number of liberal democracies of a substantial underclass. Both can be a cause of greater diversity in popular

attitudes, because immigrants and those alienated from majority lifestyles may have a looser attachment with prevailing cultural norms. In the words of one author, 'culture moves'.[2]

The process by which people acquire their central tenets and values, and gain knowledge about politics, is known as **political socialisation**. It derives from learning and social experience, and is strongly influenced by people with whom individuals have contact from early childhood through to adulthood. Political socialisation ensures that important values are passed on from one generation to the next and that the latest influx of immigrants comprehend, accept and approve the existing political system, and the procedures and institutions through which it operates. Political socialisation is for this reason overwhelmingly conservative in its effects, having a tendency to ensure that people conserve the best of the past.

political socialisation
The process by which individuals acquire their particular political ideas, their knowledge, feelings and judgements about the political world.

In any society, the political culture will have several strands which are only partially compatible. Different elements of the public draw more or less strongly from these several strands. Because of this, **public opinion** will vary on and across the issues of the day. Public opinion is the distribution of citizen opinion on matters of public concern or interest. As Heywood explains, 'political culture differs from public opinion in that it is fashioned out of long-term values rather than simply people's reactions to specific policies and problems'.[3]

public opinion
The cluster of attitudes and beliefs held by people about a variety of issues, in our case those concerning politics and policy issues. There can be no single public opinion. There are rather several opinions held by members of the public.

Political culture in Britain

Britain has a long history of independent existence as a more or less united nation. It has a strong commitment to democracy, with its representative institutions of government, based on regular and free elections, in addition to strong liberal values about individual rights and responsibilities. It was the first parliamentary democracy in Europe, so that many of the other countries modelled their institutions, party system and methods on the British experience. In particular, the Westminster model was exported to many of the colonies and territories of the old Empire, when countries became independent.

The British have traditionally preferred to use parliamentary channels rather than the anti-parliamentary politics of street demonstrations, direct action and terrorist violence. People generally accept the main institutions of state and the idea that issues should be resolved through the ballot box and not by the bullet

and the bomb, even if at various times individuals and groups in parts of Ireland have not subscribed to that preference. People have been willing to place trust in the political elite that rules them, so that social deference (respect for or compliance with the wishes of those in authority) has often been mentioned as a source of British conformity and acquiescence in the status quo.

Continuity is another key element in British political life. It affects not just the hereditary monarchy and House of Lords, which until 1999 had a large hereditary element, but other institutions that also have a long history. As we have seen, the country has not been a prey to the internal turmoil, revolutionary dissent or occupation by a foreign power which many of our continental neighbours have experienced. Relatively free from upheaval, the British have enjoyed a stable political system, in which the past presses heavily on present practice. Evolutionary rather than revolutionary change has been preferred. The British have a preference for pragmatism over ideology and doctrine. As the country lacks a written constitution, ideas and institutions relating to government have evolved over the years, being modified as change becomes desirable or necessary. When politicians do suggest something which is very different to what voters are used to, such proposals are regarded with suspicion. Constitutional and parliamentary reformers invariably find that many individuals and groups are resistant to new thinking.

Britain's island position has affected its attitudes, with important historical, economic and political consequences. The sea has helped to protect the country from invasion, but has also strengthened the development of a common language and national identity. It has made people reluctant to throw in their lot with the European Community/Union, for Britain is separated from the continent by geography, language and culture. In many respects it has stronger bonds with the United States, with ties of historical development, defence interests, language and entertainment. To the island Britain, trade was always important and a spur to colonial expansion – it developed a British Empire, now the Commonwealth, so that in foreign policy it has links with Europe (since joining the Community in 1973), the Commonwealth and the USA.

Political unity, stability and a tradition of independence have long been regarded as characteristics of the British political system. So too has consensus – the preference for agreement, cooperation and moderation. The majority of British people have long preferred cooperation to confrontation and party politicians, once in office, have acknowledged this and for much of the time avoided confrontationalism. A political consensus prevailed in the postwar era through to the late 1970s, but the procedural consensus – broad agreement about the means of conducting political debate – has a much longer history.

British governments usually command a parliamentary majority following their election victory. This provides them with a legitimate right to govern.

The British appear to favour strong government by leaders of united parties and often punish divided parties at election time. Defenders of the First Past The Post electoral system have traditionally emphasised the importance of effective and stable government by a single party, in preference to any notions of fairness to small parties. Other than after a result which has been particularly distorted and harsh on the Liberals or some other third party, there has been until relatively recently been little demand for change in the way we elect our MPs.

Many people like to be led by politicians who know what they are doing and who lead parties which are broadly in agreement about what needs to be done and the manner and timing of doing it. Leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair have both been seen as 'strong leaders', prepared to ignore the dissident voices of some of their backbenchers and even carry out unpopular social policies. In both cases, too, they have relished the roles of war leader and statesperson on the global stage. Such has been the power of British administrations in the postwar era that writers have claimed we have an 'elective dictatorship'. British government has a reputation among commentators for being powerful and centralised, so that opposition in the House of Commons can be ignored – particularly if the majority is a large one. Ministers can use the government majority to push through fundamental changes in British life, if it is their will so to do.

Yet alongside the preference for strong government, there is also an attitude of tolerance towards the expression of alternative and minority opinions, with a clear recognition of the right – duty – of the Opposition to oppose. The existence of an official Opposition party in the House symbolises a commitment to free speech and the rights of personal liberty. Individual freedom is a much-cherished value. Whenever suggestions are made which appear to make an inroad into that attachment, there tends to be an outcry that is not just confined to civil libertarians. In a more dangerous age, people have had to get used to more security checks at airports, but issues such as alleged tapping of telephones, proposals for greater police surveillance, speed cameras to control the way we drive, the abandonment of juries in some court trials and the possible introduction of ID cards cause much resentment, if not actual resistance. British people do not like having to prove who they are and the idea of carrying 'papers' goes 'against the grain'. Neither do they like unnecessary regulations which deny them access or tell them how something should be done.

In spite of the growth of a less deferential, more questioning attitude (see box on p. 6) and a willingness on occasion to resort to direct action, there is still no great desire on the part of the majority for radical change. There remains a broad – if declining – acceptance of the institutions of government and a preference for democratic methods. Madgwick has described the way in which 'the British

people stumble on, resilient, tolerant, hopeful (in a Micawber fashion), confused, but with a remarkable capacity for putting up with discontent for fear or worse, and defying the political scientist to penetrate the secret of the ambivalent political attitudes which have sustained their stable democracy'.[4]

Homogeneity, consensus and deference

Back in the 1960s, Punnett wrote of British society as being marked by three particular characteristics: homogeneity (sameness), consensus (broad agreement) and deference (social respect for one's superiors).[5] They were long-established features of the British way of life. All of them have been under strain since he wrote his first edition.

Ethnic homogeneity is no longer the force that it was, for British society is now more culturally diverse than ever before. It has been – sometimes painfully – transformed into a multicultural society, with London and several towns and cities being areas of high-density immigration. It still lacks the problems which characterise many other countries where linguistic, religious or racial cleavages are more apparent. However, conflicts based on such divisions are often difficult to resolve, more so than those based on class and economic disparities. People have a chance of escaping from a depressed region, poor living conditions or a particular social class. It is more difficult to escape from a group into which you were born – even should you wish to do so – especially if your skin colour is distinctive.

Consensus in society about shared ideas and values has been shaken in recent years as well. Broad agreement on policy goals was a feature of government in the 1950s to 1970s. It was replaced after 1979 by the more ideological approach of the Thatcher years, when the Prime Minister provided a more distinctive and many would say harsher approach to social and economic policy. Consensus on procedural matters has also been under strain. The vast majority still accept that grievances can be addressed through peaceful, parliamentary channels, but a minority has been more willing to employ direct action to achieve its ends. Strikes have been much less common than they were in the 1960s and 1970s, but (sometimes politically motivated) protests and riots have been more in evidence in recent decades.

Deference too has been a declining feature of British life. Walter Bagehot drew attention to deference in his classic study of the English Constitution, written in 1867, noting the respect of the people for law and order and their near-reverence liking for the monarchy.[6] It is a rather out-of-date concept which dates back to the social respect with which some members of the working class looked up to those above them on the class ladder. They regarded the traditional rulers of the country as people 'born to rule', having had the right background, education and upbringing. Working-class Conservatism was often explained in terms of deference, voters seeing the sort of people who once led the party as superior in their governing abilities. These days have long disappeared. In a more educated age, people are likely to value others according to their contribution rather than their social status, and journalistic attitudes to figures of authority have also served to undermine respect. In any case, it is less easy to look up to Conservative leaders who – in several recent cases – have had a similar background to one's own.

Political culture in the USA

A sense of unity, despite diversity

America is a multi-lingual, multi-racial society of great social diversity. Yet many of the immigrants and their descendants have taken on board many traditional American values such as a commitment to liberty and equality. There are forces which bring Americans together and give them a sense of common identity. Part of this sense of national unity can be explained by the pursuit of the **American Dream** via which all may prosper in a land of opportunity. The Dream is much referred to in literature and films. It is in Bill Clinton's words, 'the dream that we were all raised on'. It is based on a powerful but simple idea, that if you work hard and play by the rules you should have the chance to go as far as your God-given talents will take you. Americans are valued according to what they make of their chances in life. They should use their enterprise and initiative to make the best of themselves. If they do, 'there is gold in that there mountain'.

American Dream
The widespread belief that by hard work and individual enterprise even the most poor and lowly Americans can achieve economic success, a better way of life and enhanced social status, in a land of immense opportunity. According to the Dream, there are no insurmountable barriers which prevent Americans from fulfilling their potential, even if many individuals and groups do not do so.

Adversity, a sense of common danger, has also helped to unify Americans. War and the threat of war often serve to bind a nation. In World War Two, Americans of all creeds and backgrounds could recognise the contribution made by people very different from themselves. The same is true of September 2001 and thereafter. The attacks on the World Trade Center, which destroyed the well-known image of the New York skyline and killed nearly 4000 people, had the effect of bringing New Yorkers and their fellow Americans together. They were determined to hunt down the perpetrators of the outrage and to show the world that their spirits could not be crushed.

Finally, shared values, a common culture, the prevalence of the mass media and intermarriage serve to blur the differences between different groups. Most Americans can accept and embrace American values. They share a common attachment for certain ideals and processes, and it is to those that we now turn.

Common values

Political culture in the USA derives from some of the ideas which inspired the pioneers who made the country and the Founding Fathers who wrote its constitution. It includes faith in democracy and representative government, the ideas of popular sovereignty, limited government, the rule of law, equality, liberty, opportunity, support for the free-market system, freedom of speech and individual rights. But of course, at different stages in history, the existing

political culture and the process of political socialisation serve some individuals and groups better than others. Until the 1960s, the prevailing political culture suggested that women and ethnic minorities were not full members of the political community. Not surprisingly, these two groups sought to change the political culture. They wanted to see ideas of equality and opportunity applied to them as much as to other groups. Since then, there has been a 'rights culture', as activists sought to demand the rights they regarded as their due.

American political culture is tied up with **American exceptionalism**, the view that American society and culture are exceptional in comparison with other advanced industrial democracies. In a sense this is true of all societies and cultures, but supporters of this view suggest that there are several features peculiar to US politics and society that distinguish the country from other Western democracies. It was the Frenchman **Alexis de Tocqueville**, who first wrote of 'American exceptionalism', back in 1835.[7] He saw the United States as 'a society uniquely different from the more traditional societies and status-bound nations of the Old World'. It was 'qualitively different in its organising principles and political and religious institutions from . . . other western societies', some of its distinguishing features being a relatively high level of social egalitarianism and social mobility, enthusiasm for religion, love of country, and ethnic and racial diversity.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59)

A liberal French aristocrat, writer and politician, who visited the United States as a young man, was impressed and wrote his *Democracy in America*.

One of its characteristics is a strong belief in **liberal individualism** dating back to the ideas of the English political philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), who wrote of people's inalienable natural rights. By contrast, the culture of the Old World has emphasised ideas of hierarchy and nationality. What Hames and Rae refer to as **messianism** is another.[8] Americans tend to see themselves as the 'Last, Best, Hope of Mankind', a theme apparent in foreign policy where some are isolationists who reject the rest of the world as beyond redemption while others are idealists who want to save the world and make it better (i.e. adopt American values and goals).

Sometimes, the different values identified conflict with each other. If liberal individualism is one element of the American outlook, stressing as it does freedom from overbearing governmental interference, so too is the republican strand another. As we see below, it is associated with the idea of political involvement by a concerned and interested citizenry, what Welch describes as 'a marked tilt towards participation'.[9] At times, the dislike of central government and fear of 'governmental encroachment' is more influential than the commitment to the ideal and practice of participation.

What are the key elements of American political culture?

As we have pointed out, analyses of political culture are inevitably replete with generalisations which must be regarded with a degree of scepticism. There is and can be no definitive listing of shared political values and the ones suggested in any contribution often tend to overlap with each other. At times, they have been ignored or at least denied in regard to certain social groups. Nonetheless, we can point to a number of shared interests and concerns.

1 Liberalism

A recognition of the dignity and worth of the individual and a tendency to view politics in individualistic terms. Classical liberals believed in government by consent, limited government, and the protection of private property and opportunity. They also stressed the importance of individual rights, some of which were regarded as 'inalienable'. Americans have great faith in the common sense of the average citizen and believe that all individuals have rights as well as responsibilities. Everyone should have the chance to fulfil their destiny, and no individual or group should be denied recognition of their worth or dignity. Individual liberties must be respected and people's opportunities for economic advance unimpeded. By contrast, collectivist policies and solutions (those based around the idea of the state – on behalf of its citizens – acknowledging society's collective responsibility to care about those in need) have never been embraced. (see the section on socialism on pp. 15, 188–91).

The word 'liberal' derives from the Latin *liber*, meaning 'free' or 'generous', from which we can detect an attachment to qualities such liberty and tolerance. The Americans have a strong attachment to liberty, as symbolised by the statue erected in its name. The War of Independence was fought in its name, and the Constitution, like the American Revolution, proclaims this commitment. The late Clinton Rossiter, a renowned American political scientist, saw liberty as the pre-eminent value in US political culture: 'We have always been a nation obsessed with liberty. Liberty over authority, freedom over responsibility, rights over duties – these are our historic preferences'.[10]

2 Equality

The words in the Declaration of Independence are clear enough: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . . '. As a relatively young nation, the USA lacks the feudal past which was a feature of many European countries. There has always been a strong belief in social equality, and although there are sharp inequalities of income and wealth, the divisions are not associated with a class system as they have been in Britain. The equality Americans favour is not equality of outcome, but rather of worth. They do not want a society in which all are reduced to the same level, for this

would conflict with their belief in the opportunities they value in the American Dream. They do believe that every American is entitled to equal consideration, equal protection under the law and equal rights, even if at times there has been considerable reluctance to acknowledge that this applies to both black and white inhabitants.

Equality is more about prospects of advancement than about result. No one should be limited by his or her social background, ethnicity, gender or religion. All should have the chance to climb the ladder of success and share in the American Dream, in a land of opportunity. Even those of humble origins can still rise to greatness, so that Bill Clinton, the lad from Hope (Arkansas) could reach the White House.

3 Democracy

A belief in government by the people, according to majority will. Today, this might be seen as similar to liberalism with its emphasis on personal freedom and rights, but at the time the American Constitution was written in 1787 there was far more support for liberalism (as set out in the writings of John Locke) than for democracy, seen as rule by majorities and mobs.

Liberalism and democracy have roots in an older classical republican tradition. This dates back to the days of Ancient Rome and in particular to the writings of the Roman consul and writer Cicero. The speeches and writings of the Founding Fathers often employed republican imagery and symbols, and statues of George Washington have often shown him wearing Roman costume. The Ancient Romans believed in the idea of a self-governing republic ultimately ruled by a knowledgeable and involved citizenry. In this sense, the term 'republic' refers to a form of government that derives its powers directly or indirectly from the people. In a representative democracy, Americans could select representatives to govern and lay down the rules by which society operates. For the Founding Fathers, 'republic' seemed preferable to 'democracy', with its overtones of demagogy, mass rule and the mob.

Such fears have long disappeared and there has throughout much American history been a strong consensus in support of democracy and the values that underpin it, including:

- **A deep interest in the exercise of power**, who has it, how it was acquired and how those who exercise it can be removed.
- **A general acceptance of majority rule**, but also respect for minority rights so that minorities can have the opportunity to become tomorrow's majority. Pluralism in society, involving the existence and acceptance of distinctive groups and political toleration, has been important as the country has become more ethnically and religiously diverse, and people have adopted new lifestyle arrangements.

- **A firm commitment to popular sovereignty**, the idea that ultimate power resides in the people themselves
- **Strong support for the rule of law**, with government being based upon a body of law applied equally and with just procedures. The principle of fairness applies, with all individuals entitled to the same rights and level of protection, and expected to abide by the same codes of behaviour. No one is above the law, for in the words of Chief Justice Marshall: 'the government of the United States has been emphatically termed a government of laws, not of men'.
- **A dislike and distrust of government and a fear of the tyrannical rule and exercise of excessive authority that can accompany it**, not surprising in a land whose pioneers tamed the wilderness, created new frontiers and tried to build themselves a better future. Americans have always had a wariness about those who exercise power over them – a distrust which has roots in Lockean liberalism, but was primarily based upon the experiences of the colonists in their dealings with King George III. This suspicion of government and things associated with it may be a factor in the low turnouts in many elections.
- **A liking for politicians who seem to articulate the thoughts and feelings of the common man.** Populists who have railed against the special interests, the East Coast establishment or communists have often found a ready response. Anti-politicians such as **Ross Perot** and those who blend religion and politics in the fashion of **Jesse Jackson** have at times found themselves backed by a surge of popular enthusiasm.

Ross Perot

A billionaire Texan businessmen who had created and managed a highly successful computer firm; in 1992 he made known his interest in running for the presidency. Lacking any party label, he was able to get his name on the ballot paper in every state as a representative of his own creation, the 'United We Stand America' movement. Campaigning on the need to cut the deficit in national finances, he recruited campaign professionals and a mass of volunteer workers, and attracted a high profile on television. In the November election, although he failed to win in any single state, he did very well, attracting some 19 per cent of the popular vote. He stood again in 1996, as the candidate for the newly created Reform Party. This time, he made little impact.

Jesse Jackson

In the movement for civil rights, the black church played an influential role in communicating ideas and information. Black ministers such as Dr Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson became nationally recognised figures. Jackson was a Democratic presidential candidate in 1984 and 1988. He has never held elective office, but has maintained a high profile – largely as a result of media visibility. An effective orator, he is on the left of the party and has shown a strong interest in the rights of minority groups and in issues of peace and war. He was highly critical of the Florida election result in 2000, alleging that numerous irregularities and examples of intimidation of potential black voters meant that the outcome was deeply flawed.

THE GROWING DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT AND POLITICIANS IN THE UNITED STATES

In the middle of the twentieth century, Americans viewed government much more positively than today. According to the National Opinion Research Center, more than three quarters of US people felt that national government was a beneficial influence which improved conditions in the country. Since then, many things have happened to undermine their confidence, among them the war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Nixon, the Iran Contra affair, and the impeachment and trial of President Clinton. In addition, a series of cases involving the ethics of elected officials at national, state and local level have taken their toll. Political scandals have been a virus infecting political life for a long time, probably throughout American history, but the combination of recent abuses of power and personal indiscretions has fuelled a belief that politicians cannot be trusted and contributed to an increase in cynicism. At the approach of the new millennium, the number of Americans who expressed 'confidence in Washington to do what is right', was down from 76 per cent in 1964 to 29 per cent. Nearly two-thirds claimed to feel 'distant and unconnected' with government'.

Many Americans are indifferent to what goes on in Washington. It seems remote from their experience and – many might add – the policies which emerge from the capital are often wasteful, ineffective and ill-judged. Such anti-government feeling is widely held, even if its intensity varies considerably. At the one end of the spectrum are moderates who are wary of over-bearing Washingtonian attitudes and too much interference. At the other, there are strong devotees of states rights who much resent the intrusion of central government and who wish to see far more decision-making conducted at state or local level.

The anti-government message was evident in the 'Harry and Louise' TV ads used to attack the health reform plans of President Clinton in the early–mid-1990s. It is also apparent in the lobbying of those who fight any attempt at governmental interference in the constitutional right of all Americans to bear arms (see also p. 49).

War in Vietnam

Began under Kennedy and escalated under Johnson, waged to prevent communist North Vietnam from taking over the South, and by so doing to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. This was America's first defeat in war. Vietnam was deeply divisive in American society. As the administration talked peace at the same time as intensifying the bombing of the North there was a credibility problem. Americans did not know what to believe.

4 Others

Other features could be mentioned, such as love of God and of their country, eternal optimism and idealism. Americans tend to be very religious. **Religion** (see also p. 22) matters in American life, in a way that it does not in most of Europe. There is a high rate of religious observance, especially among older

Watergate – Nixon resignation

The collective name for a series of abuses of power which began with a break-in at the national headquarters of the Democratic Party in the Watergate Building, Washington DC, in June 1972, as part of an attempt by the White House to find out the Democrats' election plans and thereby assist the chances of a Republican victory. As the story unfolded, many revelations were made, not least concerning the behaviour of the Nixon administration. Several Cabinet members ended up in jail, for a variety of offences. Eventually, the finger pointed to the President himself, who had clearly been deeply involved in the burglary and the cover-up which followed. It became apparent that he had been taping conversations in the Oval Office. When parts of the tapes were released on the demand of the Supreme Court, his position became untenable and with talk of him being impeached (see below), he resigned in August 1974 – the first President to so do.

Iran–Contra affair

'Irangate' concerned the illegal selling of arms to Iran in return for the release of American hostages detained in the Middle East, during the Reagan administration. The proceeds of the sales were channelled to the Contras, rebel forces who were seeking to overthrow a left-wing government in Nicaragua which the American government was hoping to destabilise. The President had publicly denounced the sale of weapons to states sponsoring terrorism, but his reputation remained reasonably intact even if the behaviour of some of his supporters was highly damaging.

Clinton and his impeachment

Impeachment is the process by which Congress can remove officers of the national government, including the President. The House votes on a series of charges and a trial is then conducted in the Senate. After a series of investigations into tales of presidential dissembling and sexual/financial misconduct, Bill Clinton was impeached by the House but later acquitted in the Senate. He was said to have lied under oath, obstructed justice and failed to respond to the questions posed by the House Judiciary Committee, in the case concerning Monica Lewinsky, widely known as Monicagate. Rumours of financial, political and sexual misconduct had swirled around him during his entire public life, and they continued to do so during his eight years in the White House.

Americans. Polling evidence suggests that they are more likely than citizens in other Western countries to consider religion important in their lives, to believe in Heaven, Hell and the Day of Judgement, to pray and to attend church. Religion is a defining feature of the political culture and has shaped the character of aspects of political life. The Declaration of Independence affirms that all men are 'endowed by their Creator' with certain rights and ends with

a recognition of the 'firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence' necessary to make the Declaration a success. Religious faith – the Christian faith – has been and remains all-important. Candidates for office routinely acknowledge the Almighty in their speeches and discuss issues such as abortion, gay rights and foreign policy in moralistic terms. In the 2000 election, both George W. Bush and his Democrat opponent, Al Gore, frequently referred to their status as 'born again' Christians, and many other candidates were keen to parade details of their personal faith. Every President from Jimmy Carter onwards has claimed to have been 'born again'.

religious right

The term is used to cover a broad movement of conservatives who advance moral and social values. It first attracted attention as the Moral Majority, but later became known as the Christian Coalition. Highly active in the Republican Party, it seeks to take America back to its 'true heritage' and to 'restore the godly principles that made the nation great'. Most of its members emphasise that they have been 'born again' (in other words, their religious life has been dramatically altered by a conversion experience which has made them see issues very differently). They tend to be fundamentalist (accepting the literal truth of the Bible), and are unquestioning in accepting Christian doctrines.

Religious groups operate at all levels of the political system, seeking to ensure that those who would attain political power share their beliefs. Religion has shaped and informed the character of political movements such as the one which campaigned for civil rights, and more recently the **religious right**.

Today, there are many more faiths in the USA than ever before, part of a remarkable upsurge in religious feeling. Religious toleration is a long-standing tradition, extending to groups with all manner of idiosyncrasies and eccentricities. It applies to the growing number of Islamic supporters, some of whom have been associated with more radical black political attitudes. Adherence to the Muslim faith poses a challenge to some traditional attitudes and values, the more so since the attack on the twin towers which placed many American Muslims in an uncomfortable and unenviable position. But as yet America has been spared the kind of religious tension which has bedevilled many other parts of the globe.

Intense admiration for and love of country is another American quality. Americans also tend to be very patriotic and to support emblems which help them to identify with their country. They acknowledge their Constitution, their anthem, their flag and other symbols of their nationhood. In particular, they respect the office of President, if not the behaviour of individual Presidents. The figure in the White House operates as a focal point of their national loyalty and especially in times of crisis he speaks up for the interests of all Americans. He and they possess the same vision. They want to build a better world for themselves and their families. They want a share in the American Dream. That Dream encompasses many of the values listed above – individualism, limited government, liberty and equal opportunities among them. It is

in essence the belief that the United States of America is a land of opportunity for those prepared to work hard, get ahead and make a fortune. Americans are valued as individuals, according to what they make of their chances in life.

Given the commitment to the American Dream and the ideas that underpin it, it is no surprise that **socialism** has never taken root in the United States. Indeed, for Seymour Lipset and Gary Marks, its absence is a cornerstone of American exceptionalism.[11] They point out that opinion polls in America continue to reveal a people whose attitudes are different to those of people in Europe and Canada. Americans do not favour an active role for government in the economy or a desire for large welfare programmes. They favour private efforts in business and welfare and rely more on philanthropic giving. The two writers point to the absence of those conditions that the left has always seen as a prerequisite for the development of any 'mass allegiance' to socialism, but draw attention to the diversity of explanations given for the failure of American socialism (see also pp. 190–1 for a more detailed analysis):

socialism

Socialists share in common a belief that unrestrained capitalism is responsible for a variety of social evils, including the exploitation of working people, the widespread existence of poverty and unemployment, gross inequality of wealth and the pursuit of greed and selfishness. Socialists would prefer to see a social system based on cooperative values and emphasise the values of community rather than of individualism. They also believe strongly in the need for a more equal and just society, based on brotherhood and a sense of social solidarity.

> **Explanations for [socialism]'s weakness are as numerous as socialists were few. Some . . . attribute the weakness of socialism to the failures of socialist organisations and leaders. Another school ascribes socialism's bankruptcy to its incompatibility with America's core values, while still others cite the American Constitution as the decisive factor.**

In their analyses of the development of socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels contributed a Marxist perspective to the debate on the failure of American socialism. Marx had assumed that the working class was destined to organise revolutionary socialist parties in every capitalist society. He and Engels had, however, noted the respects in which the United States differed from other European societies. Above all, it was a new nation and society, a democratic country lacking many of the institutions and traditions of previously feudal societies. It had a 'modern and purely bourgeois culture'. After Marx's death in 1883, Engels gave more thought to the non-emergence of socialist movements on a mass scale. He attributed the 'backwardness' of the American workers to the absence of a feudal past. In his view, 'Americans [were] born conservatives – just because America is so purely bourgeois, so entirely without a feudal past and proud of its purely bourgeois organisation'.[12]

Political ideas, institutions and values in Britain and the United States: similarities and differences

The political culture in Britain has a number of elements in common with that in the United States, as well as substantial differences. The most obvious similarity is a common commitment to the democratic process, with overwhelming support for the political institutions of either country and a wide measure of consensus about the framework in which politics should operate. It has been written that part of the confusion about American political parties is that all Democrats are republicans, and all Republicans are democrats. There are few monarchists in the United States, just as there are few who would question the merits of the democratic form. So too in Britain: monarchy is still preferred by the majority of people, even if they want it in a modernised form. Attachment to democracy is not in question, so that Malcolm Shaw has described the two countries as 'the world's two great democracies'.[13]

rule of law

Government based on the idea of the supremacy of law which must be applied equally and through just procedures. The law governs the actions of individual citizens to one another and also controls the conduct of the state towards them. Nobody is above the law, regardless of their status or position. In the United States, freedom from arbitrary action by government is written into the Constitution. The 5th Amendment requires that no person shall be deprived of 'life, liberty and property', without 'due process of law'.

In the same way, both countries share a common commitment to individual liberty. At times it may be overridden, often because of perceived threats to national security, but in terms of respect for basic rights both rate highly in the ***Humana*** scale. There is a common commitment to the **rule of law**, majority rule and tolerance for those who disagree, although in the USA such toleration has not always extended to groups on the political Left.

Humana

Professor Charles Humana, once of Amnesty International, irregularly produces a World Human Rights Guide. It is an evaluative comparison of the state of human rights in more than 100 countries. It offers a human rights rating, derived from 40 criteria. The UK scores well on press freedom and balanced broadcasting, the US on support for political rights and civil liberties.

There is also the same preference for gradual political and social change, even if at times there is a sudden move forward in a particular area of policy. When changes are introduced, they tend to be accepted by the party which once opposed them, so that there is substantial continuity of policy and an unwillingness to 'rock the boat' without good reason. Broad policy consensus was characteristic of both countries in the early decades after World War II. But even when the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher and the Republicans under Ronald Reagan shifted the centre of political gravity sharply to the Right, within a few years the main opposition party modified its stance to accept the changed situation. The Democrats were reinvented as the New Democrats and Labour became New

Labour. In both cases, some old attitudes were cast aside and policies discarded, in a bid to regain voters who had deserted them and to gain future electoral success.

Clause Four

The original Clause Four of the 1918 Constitution committed the party to public ownership (nationalisation) of the means of production, distribution and exchange. There had been previous attempts to revise it, but Tony Blair succeeded in effecting change, in 1995. The 'new' version does not include a commitment to public ownership. It actually give prominence to enterprise, competition and the free market, with references to a just society and our duty to care for each other.

There are differences in the political culture, not so much affecting thinking about the preferred form of government but more about some of the values that matter most. In Britain, liberty has rated more highly than equality. Even the Labour Party has now abandoned equality of outcome as an end objective and settled instead for equality of opportunity. From Neil Kinnock onwards, it has emphasised that liberty has the priority over equality and is to be regarded as a central tenet of party thinking, though some on the Left would not share such a view. The new **Clause Four** stresses equality of opportunity and talks of enabling people 'to realise our true potential [and] the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition'. In America, egalitarianism has a longer history, but it is interpreted more in terms of equal rights and equal participation than equality of reward or result. Equality of opportunity is again the preferred goal.

American talk of equality is seen in the attitude of people towards social class. Class barriers and differences of status based upon a class hierarchy are not recognised in American society, as they have traditionally been in Britain. In his study of 'Politics and Society', Alford found that 'status differentiation' was far more clearly apparent in Britain than in Australia, Canada or New Zealand.[14] Others too have noted a British preoccupation with class consciousness and the surviving existence of social snobbery. This runs counter to American ideas, for as Warner *et al* point out: 'In the bright glow and warm presence of the American Dream all men are born free and equal. Everyone in the American Dream has the right, and often the duty, to try to succeed and to do his best to reach the top'.[15] In the same way, deference may have lost much of its impact in Britain, but it never was a powerful force in the United States, for the whole idea of looking up to and respecting 'social superiors' is anathema.

Partly because of this difference in outlook, there has in the past been a difference of attitude towards government in both countries. Traditionally, the British have been willing to trust the men who led them, especially in the days when those politicians came from 'the 'natural rulers' of the people. Such faith cannot now be taken for granted, for distrust of the actions of government and diminished esteem for politicians have become common features in many

democracies. Many people have become disillusioned by the differences in promise and fulfilment, and have become cynical about the intentions and probity of those who run their country.

According to Parry, the British are now less trusting and more cynical than Austrians, Germans and the Swiss, but more trusting and less cynical than the Italians or the Americans.[16] Yet more recent research suggests that the number of British people who trust government to put the needs of the nation above the interests of party 'just about always/most of the time' has steadily fallen from 39 per cent in 1974 to 22 per cent in 1996, and 75 per cent now trust the government 'only some of the time/almost never', a figure which is actually lower than that recorded for America (22 per cent).[17]

THE CIVIC CULTURE

The Almond and Verba findings

The first major study of political culture was that conducted by Almond and Verba in 1963.[18] Based on lengthy interviews in five countries – Italy, Mexico, West Germany (as it existed before unification), the United Kingdom and the United States) – the authors tried to identify the political culture in which a liberal democracy may best develop. They classified political cultures into three types, according to the relationship between individuals and the political order. These were parochial, subject and participant cultures. In parochial culture, which exist in areas populated by remote tribes, the people have little to do with the process of decision-making by central government. In subject cultures, people see themselves as subjects of the government, as applies in any dictatorship. In participatory cultures, people see themselves as citizens who play a role in the political system, both contributing to it and being affected by it. Almond and Verba argued that the ideal form was a 'civic culture' in which all three elements were present, so that 'citizens are sufficiently active in politics to express their preferences to rulers, but not so involved as to refuse to accept decisions with which they disagree. Thus the civic culture resolves the tension within democracy between popular control and effective governance'.

Some results adapted from the Almond and Verba findings:

	Britain (%)	*United States (%)*
Proud of government/institutions	46	85
Proud of economic system	10	23
Believe national government improves conditions	77	76
Believe the ordinary man should be active in community	39	51

The writers concluded that Britain came near to the ideal, as did the United States to a lesser degree. In Britain, with its 'deferential civic culture' the strong 'subject' role meant that people had a positive view of the effects of government action. They were proud of and attached to their governing institutions, and good at using them effectively. This

In the United States, the distrust of government is much more long-standing, even if the fears about behaviour and motives of politicians are similar. American distrust of those in authority stems partly from their more egalitarian attitudes, but also from a feeling that those who rule may have some worthy motives but are also out to advance their own self-interest and so need to be viewed with suspicion. It was Ronald Reagan who expressed the view that 'government is the problem', rather than the solution. He was reflecting an old American view that government is at best an uncomfortable necessity, at worst a menace and that Americans needed to be left alone to pursue their ideas and enterprises.

supplemented the more 'participant' role, providing a mix which worked well. The Americans scored well on several counts, especially pride in their system of government. They had a more 'participant' culture than the British, wanting to be more involved in political life. This might not prove so stable in the long term, given the constant pressure of extensive citizen involvement and demands. But it was recognised that people in either country possessed reasonable influence over their government but often chose not to exercise it, thereby allowing governments to act with considerable freedom of manoeuvre.

Since the research was conducted in 1963, both democracies have undergone changes. As Almond and Verba noted in their 1980 update, some of the attitudes and problems of the 1960s and 1970s had left their mark on the political cultures. Britain has become less deferential, and in both countries people have become more sceptical of government, their trust in its essential benevolence having seriously declined. Moreover, they have been less willing to turn out and vote in elections. In a controversial study which challenges the original Almond and Verba research, Putnam suggests that the willingness of Americans to engage in political life has diminished in recent decades.[19] He is at odds too with the views expressed by de Tocqueville back in 1835.

De Tocqueville v Putnam

De Tocqueville observed that 'Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations'.[20] He portrayed them as belonging to 'the most democratic country in the world', extolling their involvement in groups which helped them pursue 'the objects of common desires'. Putnam doubts whether this still applies and argues that there is now a 'degree of social disengagement and civic disconnectedness' which has damaging consequences for political life. He believes that social participation is declining in the USA, observing that today more people spend time watching *Friends* than making them! More seriously, he points to fewer people engaged in volunteer work (there may be more pressure groups but average membership is only 10 per cent of its 1962 level and members tend to take a less active role), attending church or public meetings, voting in elections and trusting government.

Americans are more individualistic and wary of state intervention, whereas the British have been more willing to accept the role of government in our national life. In twentieth-century Britain, the state, on behalf of its citizens, came to acknowledge the collective responsibility of everyone to care about those in need (collectivism). After 1945, the Labour Party introduced a comprehensive programme of social welfare based upon the idea of a massive extension of governmental involvement in the nation's social and economic life. Many party enthusiasts felt that this was socialism in action. In America, with its individualist ethos and commitment to the American Dream, socialism has never taken root. Nor have the collectivist ideas associated with it, so that policies based on an extension of governmental control have been quickly denounced as 'socialistic'.

In our study of Britain and the United States, we are dealing with two very different countries: one old, one young; one relatively small, one large; one without and one with strong regional differences and attachments. They also differ greatly in their international stature. Britain is a once great power,

The social and economic background in Britain and the United States: some relevant and distinguishing characteristics

	Britain	*United States*
History	Old country, invaded in distant past by a series of races who came and went, each leaving some aspect of their lifestyle on the island. Not successfully invaded since 1066; long, stable history, largely unbroken by serious internal conflict, except for Civil War in the seventeenth century.	Developed as a result of long series of migrations. Crossing of Columbus in 1492 first of a series of voyages of exploration and discovery which ultimately led to settlement of continent. Colonisation only began in the early seventeenth century, so essentially a young country. Colonists revolted, declaring their independence from Britain in 1776, so just over 200 years of independent nationhood, with a Civil War in the mid-nineteenth century.
Size and geographical position	Relatively small: 93,000 sq. miles. Distance from south coast to north of Scotland just over 600 miles. Offshore island of European continent.	Vast landmass: 3,794,083 sq. miles. Bordered by Canada in north and Mexico in south, with Pacific Ocean to west and Atlantic to east. Geographically isolated, faces little anger of invasion or conquest. Fourth largest country in world.

whose influence in the world has waned over the last fifty years; it might continue to 'punch above its weight in world affairs', but its ability to shape events has been markedly reduced. America is a 'Super Power', the leader of the free world and the most powerful nation in the world.

Yet the countries are linked by a common language and a number of common ideals and values. The colonial link of the past is an obvious bond and so is the democratic path they have taken. In both cases, there has been continuity of free and representative government, a preference for gradual rather than revolutionary change and a commitment to individual freedom. Theirs' has been a 'special relationship'. It is not a relationship of equals, nor can it be so. Some Americans might even be unsure who the 'special relationship' is with – Israel, Germany or some other country. But when world crises develop, as over the attacks on the twin towers, the bonds soon become apparent. As John Major put it: 'It is, I think, a product of history and the long relationship of trust between like-minded democracies with a common language and similar – but not identical – interests in the world'.[21]

	Britain	*United States*
Sectional/regional differences	Lacks serious regional, sectional divisions, although Scots and Welsh have long made claims about a distinctive Scottish and Welsh identity (now recognised with the creation of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly. Some regional feelings, especially in north-east of England. Broadly, the further from London people are, the more complaints there are about the 'remoteness' of Westminster, which 'doesn't care'. Northern Ireland is distinctive. The majority Protestant population stresses its 'Britishness' and wishes to remain part of the UK. Many members of the large Catholic minority emphasise their preference to belong to a united Ireland.	Obvious regional differences, traditionally between rural, agricultural South and more industrial North. South always distinctive, especially over issue of slavery; its secession led to Civil War. South also distinctive in religion. No other region has such a cohesive identity as South, but West tends to be more isolationist (further from W. Europe), as well as less inclined to favour Washington's intervention in state affairs. East is more cosmopolitan than elsewhere, with diversity of ethnic groups in cities. New England, in the north-east, wealthy, liberal and parochial.

	Britain	*United States*
Population size and density	Just over 59m in UK (57.5m in Britain) in 2001, compared with 56m in 1991. Densely populated, with 245 people per square mile.	Approximately 283m today, compared with 240m in 1990. Much less densely populated: 79.6 people per square mile.
Composition of population	No such thing as pure British stock. Blood and culture of successive invaders (e.g. Romans and Angles) mingled with that of native British inhabitants. Composition also affected by various migrations of Jews, Irish, etc. Substantial post-war immigration from New Commonwealth and recent influx of asylum seekers. Black, Asian and other ethnic minority population now 6–7 per cent of total. More than half their number born in Britain.	A nation of immigrants; all Americans other than native American Indians are immigrants or descendants of them. Came broadly in three waves: north-western Europeans and Africans (brought as slaves) before the Civil War, Southern and Eastern Europeans in late nineteenth century/early twentieth century and Hispanics (Latinos) and Asians since World War Two. Country often seen as a melting pot, with mixture of cultures, ideas and peoples. African-Americans traditionally largest minority group, now equalled by Hispanics; with Asians, make up nearly 30% of population.
Religion and religious observance[i]	Not generally a divisive factor, except in Northern Ireland. Proportion who attend church has been diminishing for years. In most families, not a key issue for discussion. Traditionally a Christian country: majority are nominally Protestant, but some cities have sizeable Catholic population. 40m describe themselves as nominally Christian. Most Christians are not active worshippers, attending only for family occasions or in times of crisis. Influx of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims has changed character of religious observance and deep fundamentalism (interpretation of every word in the scriptures as basically true) of some Muslims has opened up a new divide.	Strong Protestant leanings in Bible Belt of South where religious fundamentalism is widespread. Protestantism is creed of most Americans (58%), though Roman Catholics (26%) outnumber any single Protestant group. Religion matters in family life, society and politics, there being many varieties and shades of religious belief. God features strongly in public speeches, and 60 per cent of the population attend a church service regularly, at least every month. Politically, religion has been a catalyst for social change (e.g. Civil Rights movement of 1950s/1960s). Influence of Christian Coalition (the Religious Right) very important in Republican Party, affecting stand taken on abortion and school prayer.

	Britain	*United States*
Where people live	Highly urbanised: 90 per cent live in urban areas, though trend away from city centres to outer suburbs. Vast majority live in England (49.75m); Scotland, Wales and N. Ireland have around 5, 3 and 1.5m respectively.	Traditionally, most populous area was North-east; last few decades have seen move away from frost belt to sun belt, South and South-west gaining significantly. Twentieth century saw the development of an urban society, but now trend away from urban centres to suburban areas. 75 per cent live in urban areas.
Resources	Oil, coal and gas reserves, agriculture and forestry.	Endowed with considerable resources, ranging from coal to special metals. Rich in farmland.
Impact of industrialisation and present employment	Industrialisation has had significant impact on landscape. Engineering traditionally largest single industry. However, several millions of jobs lost with passing of old industries (coal, iron and steel, shipbuilding). Development of new industries.	North more industrialised. Now less reliance on traditional industries and more development of new ones.
Income, wealth and social class.	Significant discrepancies in ownership of income and wealth between those at top and those at bottom of social ladder. Class structure traditionally fairly rigid, though more opportunities for class mobility in recent decades with spread of educational opportunities. Substantial minority experiences relative poverty, including many members of ethnic minorities.	Income levels vary dramatically, in country which encourages enterprise and initiative. Some 10% below official poverty line, including many African-Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans. Class not seen as important, many seeing themselves as 'working Americans', irrespective of income and wealth. No strong notion of class solidarity.

Note: Figures for religious observance taken from Gallup polls, 1999 and 2000. Others from Statesmen's Yearbook, 2002.

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USEFUL WEB SITES

For the UK

www.data-archive.ac.uk UK Data Archive (University of Essex). Evidence on British social attitudes and public opinion.

www.natcen.ac.uk National Centre for Social Research.

www.statistics.gov.uk Office for National Statistics. Useful source of up-to-date information on social/economic features.

For the USA

www.census.gov US Census Bureau. Variety of statistics about social composition and lifestyles.

www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS General Social Survey. Mass of polling evidence.

www.umich.edu/nes National Election Studies. More evidence from the polls.

Constitutions 2

Constitutions describe the fundamental rules according to which states are governed, be they embodied in the law, customs or conventions. They set out how decisions are made, how power is distributed among the institutions of government, the limits of governmental authority and the methods of election and appointment of those who exercise power. Constitutions also define the relationship between the state and the individual and usually include a listing of the rights of the citizen.

There are wide variations between different types of constitution and even between different constitutions of the same type. In essence, the British Constitution can be described as unwritten, unitary, parliamentary, monarchical and flexible, whereas the American one can be seen as written, federal, presidential, republican and rigid. There are qualifications to be made to this categorisation, as we shall see in this chapter.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- What is a constitution?
- How important are constitutions?
- What advantages are there in having a codified constitution?
- How important are conventions within the British and American constitutions?
- What are the underlying principles of the British and American constitutions? How do they differ?
- How easy is it to amend the British and American constitutions?
- Is the American Constitution a perfect and timeless document?
- Why is there more talk of constitutional reform in Britain than in the United States?